# When the Church Listens to the Wrong Voice

*A Biblical Reflection on 1 Timothy 2:8-15*

Imagine two ships, both launched from the same harbor, bound for the same distant shore. One navigates by the stars, ancient and fixed, unchanged by wind or season. The other steers by the flickering lights of the coastline it happens to be passing at the moment, adjusting course with every current and swell. Both crews are sincere. Both crews are working hard. But only one ship will arrive at the right destination.

This is, in many ways, the story of the church in our time. Some congregations have chosen to navigate by the fixed stars of Scripture, holding to what the Apostle Paul taught under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Others have allowed the shifting lights of contemporary culture to redirect their course. Nowhere is this more visible than in the question of whether women should teach and exercise authority over men in the gathered assembly of God's people.

This is not a simple or unkind question. It deserves a warm, careful, and thoroughly biblical answer.

## Two Principles We Must Never Forget

Before we turn to the text of 1 Timothy 2, two foundational principles must be clearly stated, because they frame everything else.

The first principle is clear: men and women are equal in dignity, value, and standing before God. Scripture makes this unmistakable. There is no hierarchy of worth between the sexes, no superiority of one over the other. Both were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and in Christ there is neither male nor female, for all are one in him (Galatians 3:28). Any idea of gender superiority must be rejected completely and without hesitation.

The second principle is equally important: equal value does not require identical roles. The Scriptures consistently teach that men and women, while bearing the same image and enjoying the same redemption, are given different callings within the home and within the church. This is

not a limitation. It is a design. And the church that honors God's design will flourish in ways that the church that abandons it simply will not.

## A Question of Culture or Scripture?

It is a striking fact of church history that, for nearly two thousand years, the ordination of women and the practice of women teaching men in public worship were rarely questioned among orthodox Christians. It was not until 1969 that this debate emerged forcefully within Western Christianity. This timing is significant, as it coincided with the rapid rise of the women's liberation movement. Soon after, a wave of books and articles advocating for women in pastoral leadership began to appear.

One has to ask with genuine care whether this represents a fresh discovery of biblical truth or the church conforming to the world. The Apostle John warned plainly, 'For everything in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, comes not from the Father but from the world' (1 John 2:16). Paul himself calls the church to be transformed by the renewing of the mind, not conformed to the pattern of this world (Romans 12:2).

When a church in Sweden adjusts its teaching because the government pressures it to do so, or when a denomination in North America changes its position because the culture demands it, something has gone deeply wrong. The world is not the church's guide. Scripture must fill that role.

## What the Text Actually Says

First Timothy 2:11-12 reads, 'Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; she is to remain quiet.' These words are among the most discussed verses in all of Paul's letters, and they deserve our most careful attention.

We should first notice that Paul begins by affirming women as learners: "Let a woman learn." In the first century, this was a countercultural statement, as women were often excluded from formal religious instruction in the broader society. Paul insists that women must be included as

learners. God's Word is for women just as much as it is for men. The church must never slip into a pattern that treats women as less deserving of biblical teaching and spiritual growth.

The following restriction is also clear. In the context of the gathered church, women are not to teach men or exercise authority over them. Paul gives two qualifications: silence and submissiveness in the learning setting, along with two explicit prohibitions: teaching men and exercising authority over men. This same pattern appears in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, which indicates that this was not a temporary or local rule specific to Ephesus, but a principle Paul applied consistently throughout the churches.

Some have attempted to soften the text by translating 'woman' in verse 11 as 'wife,' limiting the instruction to married women speaking to their husbands. This interpretation does not hold up. The Greek word Paul uses (gunaikas)[1] in this context refers to women generally, consistent with his use of the corresponding term for men (andras)[2] in verse 8. Paul is addressing the assembly, not only the marriages within it.

## The Reason That Changes Everything

The decisive question is this: why? Why does Paul give this instruction? If his reasons were cultural, such as the need to avoid scandal in a first-century Greek city, then we might reasonably ask whether that reasoning still applies. Many in the progressive camp make precisely this argument.

Paul, however, does not give cultural reasons. He gives theological ones. Beginning in verse 13, he writes: 'For Adam was formed first, then Eve.' His first reason is the order of creation. God created Adam and then Eve, and in doing so, established an order of authority and headship that predates the fall, the Mosaic law, and any particular culture. It is woven into the fabric of what it means to be human, male and female, before God.

His second reason, found in verse 14, is the fall: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." This is not meant to place blame on women or to shame them forever. Rather, it is an observation about the consequences that arise when God's created

[1] Root: γυνή
[2] Root: ἀνήρ

order is overturned. Eve took initiative in a moment when Adam should have remained steadfast, while Adam failed to fulfill his responsibility. The result was disorder and sin. The Apostle uses this account from the Garden of Eden to show the church what it must be careful to avoid in its own life.

The New Testament scholar John Murray, in his landmark work on creation ordinances, *Principles of Conduct*, observed that the entry of sin into the world does not eliminate or revise the structures God established at creation. Those structures remain. The church that honors them is not backward or unkind. It is obedient.

## What Women Are Called To

It would be a tragic misreading of this passage to conclude that women have little role or importance in the church of Jesus Christ. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul's letter to Titus shows that older women are to teach and mentor younger women, guiding them in love, faithfulness, and godly character (Titus 2:3-4). Timothy's faith was shaped by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, both of whom are honored in Scripture for their sincere faith (2 Timothy 1:5). Women are called to pray, to do good works, and to serve in the essential roles of encouragement, care, and discipleship that are vital to the life of the church.

The point is not that women are to be silent in every conceivable way in the life of the church. The point is that the public teaching and governing authority of the assembled congregation, when both men and women are present, belongs to qualified men whom God has called and gifted for that purpose. This is a specific role in a specific context, not a sweeping diminishment of women's gifts or calling.

## Navigating by the Fixed Stars

The denominations that have abandoned this teaching have not done so after careful re-reading of Scripture. They have done so in response to cultural pressure, which has been building for decades and shows no sign of relenting. The church is not obligated to follow wherever the culture leads. It is called to follow wherever the Word of God leads. Wives of church officers,

deacons, and elders play a vital role in the church, providing love and support for their husbands' ministry work.

The Apostle Paul was no chauvinist. He was a man who, under the Spirit's inspiration, declared that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28) and who commended and honored women like Phoebe, Priscilla, and Mary for their extraordinary service to the gospel (Romans 16:1-6). He was also a man who understood that God's design for the gathered church is not an accident of history but a reflection of eternal realities, rooted in creation, clarified by the fall, and confirmed by consistent apostolic teaching.

The church that holds to this teaching can do so with warmth, with love for its sisters in Christ, with a deep commitment to honoring and developing the gifts of every woman in the congregation. The goal is never to diminish. The goal is to be faithful to the one who bought the church with His own blood and who alone has the right to tell her how she should order her life. Let us navigate, then, by the fixed stars of Holy Scripture. They will never fail us!

"*The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever*" (Isaiah 40:8).

**Reed S. Rusniak**